

HEBREWS

Standing Firm on the Unseen Foundation of God's Word Hebrews 11:1-7

For those of you just beginning to attend Grace, you may be interested to know that in the fall of 2014 we spent 10 weeks examining the book of Job. The first of those 10 sermons was actually anchored in Romans 8, which would be relevant at this spot in our study of Hebrews, especially considering Hebrews was written to a church that consisted of a handful of Jewish believers who were on the cusp of violent persecution. When you read the book of Job, you are almost breathless with the waves of disaster that roll over his family, one after the other. Have you ever noticed how the patterns we discover in Scripture are so often the same patterns we find to be true in our own lives? Hopefully, none of you have experienced the kind of devastation that Job faced, but I am going to guess that you understand what someone means when they say, "When it rains it pours." It seems that when something really bad happens in your life, more often than not, another trouble is on its heels, and then, another.

Maybe the most difficult thing for Job was his absolute isolation. His wife told him to curse God and die, and his friends judged him – "GUILTY, JOB! You must be guilty for God to punish you in this way!" Worst of all, the heavens remained silent when Job pled his case that there was no cause in his life that should have led to this tragedy, including the death of all ten of his children in one blow.

Can I stop and ask you a question? If God always answered your prayers – especially, if he always answered them exactly as you asked him to – how would your faith ever grow? Wouldn't affirmative answers to all prayer reduce God to Santa Claus – and, by the way, I have been a good boy, don't you know? But, it's the

wrong season for that, so back to Job. Well, back to our “Job-like” lives.

Maybe the worst thing in your cancer diagnosis or your job loss or bankruptcy or the break-up of your marriage or your personal struggle is that you feel so alone. Either you feel hopelessly guilty, as Peter did after he denied Jesus, or you feel offended and misunderstood, like Job. Either way, you are alone. Conversely, when you are facing a mountain you know that you are incapable of climbing in your own strength, there is nothing quite like having someone who has been through what you are experiencing to come alongside of you and put an arm around you and say, “I understand. I have been where you are and I get it.”

Hebrews 11 is like that. Okay, I understand that reading about those who have suffered in ways similar to your own ordeal is not quite the same as someone beside you telling you that it’s going to be okay – unless it happens to be your Creator and Redeemer who is telling you that everything is going to be okay. In fact, one of the great benefits of the book of Job is to remind us that there is more going on than meets the eye and we would do best to reserve our judgment about the unfairness of life or the flaws of others lest God tell us to tighten our belts and answer a few questions.

Hebrews 11 can be a forest and trees kind of thing. When someone says, “I am afraid that you cannot see the forest for the trees,” it means that you have become so focused on the details that you have missed the big picture. You can do that in Hebrews 11, focusing only on the ones whose faith is commended. If that is your only focus, you may have a problem when you come to Samson and Jephthah. At the same time, we can miss the trees for the forest, or, we can be so focused on the big picture that we miss some of the beautiful details that are written for our benefit.

There are big ideas in Hebrews 11 as well as great individual examples of believing God's Word in action. Each week we are in Hebrews 11, I will share the big ideas from that text, which will often be emphasized later in the chapter, as well. Here are some of the ideas we will encounter in Hebrews 11:1-7, which is our text for today:

- 1. The faith described in Hebrews 11 cannot be separated from the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus to the right hand of God described in detail in Hebrews 1-10**

Now, that may seem a bit suspect when you consider that all of the men and women listed as those with great faith were OT figures who lived before Christ. In fact, in today's text we will go back to the first two people ever born on earth – Cain and Abel. It is not that the OT saints were looking toward Jesus' death on the cross – a suffering Messiah would have made no sense to them – but, rather, it was God who was looking forward to the cross, according to Romans 3:25. The faith to which the writer of Hebrews was pointing his readers was based on the Gospel story – Jesus' death and resurrection as taught in the first 10 chapters of Hebrews.

- 2. Therefore, our faith is only as meaningful as the object of our faith (Jesus) is faithful**

If God is not reliable, then our faith is meaningless. How do we know he is reliable? Is there basis for our belief? Yes. Christianity is an historical religion and when the NT was written, it was written in such a way, in places, to challenge the readers to disprove Jesus' resurrection if they could. It is God's story being played out and recorded as history, but also interpreted by the writer of Hebrews and other apostles to show the fullness and beauty of God's plan that was in place from the very beginning. As Tim Keller says, faith is more than – though, not less than – rational. It makes sense – but,

only if you have faith! The world says, “Show me that you exist, God, and I will believe.” God says, through his Word, “Believe me and I will show you that I exist.” If Jesus is faithful, then our faith is meaningful. Another truth of Hebrews 11 is:

- 3. Faith is not blind, but the full reward for our faith will only be realized when we die or when Jesus returns – whichever comes first**

Why do we believe? If the Bible is only rational, it can be disproved as easily as it can be shown to be a magnificent story that points us to Jesus. Why do we believe? We just do – because God is in the middle of our faith. Every believer can testify to God’s faithful keeping of his promises in his or her life, but we will not see our full reward until we are in heaven. Faith and hope, in Hebrews, are closely related, and hope, as we find almost every week in this part of Hebrews, is wrapped up in eternal life with Jesus, not so much in the hope of this life getting better – though, it often does. The last big picture truth we will think about this morning is:

- 4. God’s Word always accomplishes the purpose for which it was intended**

You know the verse in Isaiah 55 that makes this very claim – verse 11, to be precise: “My Word shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” God’s design is that our faith is inextricably linked with his Word. When God’s Word is spoken to us, it either brings judgment or life, and life comes through faith. You will see all four of these truths being played out in the first seven verses of Hebrews 11, which we will read now. After this lengthy introduction, let’s read our text, Hebrews 11:1-7. As is our custom at Grace, I will ask you to stand for the reading of Scripture. I will be reading from the ESV.

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 For by it the people of old received their commendation. 3 By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. 5 By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. 6 And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. 7 By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

“Now, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” That is the definition of faith! That clears it right up, doesn’t it? If we break it down just a bit, it begins to take on shape. Hope is the promise of eternal life that we have in Jesus, and, not only do we have the witness of Jesus when he was on earth, but we have God’s Word that so carefully lays out what Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the Father’s right hand fully means. God’s promises are, of course, in his Word, and, John 1 tells us that Jesus is the Word, so faith is wrapped up in our belief that Jesus died for our sins. We are sure of the hope to which God has called us.

Faith is also the conviction of things not seen. This is where some people think you are crazy, of course. Truth is, some of you used to

think that those who believed that there is an afterlife were crazy, and those who believed it to the point that they wanted to convert you were certifiably crazy. And, now, you believe – because the Spirit of God drew you to Jesus, in whom you placed all of your hope for eternal life. The choice you made to accept God’s provision for sin as your hope will be addressed in just a few verses, but first note that according to verse 2, the OT people of God that we will encounter in this chapter were saved the same way you are – by grace through faith. The object of their faith was slightly different in that they believed the promises of God, which were not as clear to them as they are to us today since we have the testimony of Jesus, but their faith is the reason they were commended by God, not their good works. Their actions that we will read about were the result of their faith, not the basis of their relationship with God.

Men and women of faith, both in the OT and in these NT days, all believe that God spoke the world into existence. Furthermore, if there is a Creator, then we acknowledge that we are accountable to him. If there is not a Creator, then we are accountable only to ourselves and we live life as we see fit. You can see why some would work so hard to convince themselves, through science and reason, that there is no Creator. But the evidence for a Creator is so vast that even the most strident atheists must question whether they have missed something. Indeed, Pascal’s wager that it is far better to live as though God exists than to live as though he does not, applies to all. There is more sophistication to the 17th century mathematician’s argument than that, but are you truly willing to risk that God only resides in the minds of weak men and women who are either afraid to die or are too backward to understand the way the world works?

Consider Soren Kierkegaard’s challenge: “Do you not know that there comes a midnight hour when everyone has to throw off his mask? Do you believe that life will always let itself be mocked? Do you think you can slip away a little before midnight in order to

avoid this? Or are you not terrified by it?” I watched both Carl Sagan and Christopher Hitchens soften in their mocking and angry rejection of a Creator in the days before they died with cancer. For us? “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.” We believe that on the basis of God’s Word to us in Scripture. To quote Tim Keller, yet again, “Unless you have an authoritative view of the Bible, you’ve got a God you created and you’re going to be lonely.” You see that, right? If you can find a way to make Scripture to be authoritative in some places, but not in all places, you can fashion a god to your own liking. Best not to do that, it would seem.

The first person whose faith is given as an example for us in Hebrews 11 is Abel, and his faith is held in contrast to his brother’s unbelief. Genesis 4 tells us that Cain and Abel were the first two people ever born. It is fitting, then, that these two men represent the only two types of people who have ever lived. Adam and Eve had great hopes for Cain, their firstborn. God had promised Eve that he would send a man who would undo the curse that was put in place when Adam and Eve sinned and the entire universe fell with them.

Because of God’s promise to Eve in Genesis 3:15, she was nearly certain that Cain was the one who would set things right. “I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord,” she said when Cain was born. She meant, “the” man. Turns out not to have been the case. Cain and Abel knew everything that Adam and Eve knew about the cost of sin. Even though we are not told about God’s instructions for them to bring offerings, it is obvious that they knew to bring an offering to the Lord. Cain was a farmer and Abel was a shepherd. There was nothing right or wrong with either profession. The problem was in Cain’s heart. He brought the best fruit from his labors, thinking, “Surely this will please God. Look at all I have accomplished.” Abel, on the other hand, knew that he was so

unworthy that he dared not present himself before the Lord without a blood sacrifice. God accepted Abel's offering and refused Cain's offering, which infuriated Cain, who then killed his brother. It is Abel's faith in God's promises, verse 4 tells us, that still speaks.

All men and women who have ever lived have either followed Cain's way, which can be anyone, from the worst sinners the world has ever known to the most religious people you could imagine, or, they have followed Abel's example to approach God only with a blood sacrifice, signifying repentance and faith in the promises of God. In our day, we approach God through faith in Jesus.

So, in which category do you belong? Some would say, "Well, I am a pretty good person. I feel like I can make a decent case for God allowing me into heaven." Or, maybe you are aware of your need for God's mercy, saying, "Lord, I am a sinner. I know I deserve eternal separation from you, but I believe that Jesus died for me. I know his blood is my only hope. Save me, for Jesus' sake." Even though God's acceptance of Abel's offering threw Cain in such a rage that he killed his brother, the moment Abel died, his faith became sight and he now lives with God in heaven, and he will for all eternity.

Enoch, on the other hand, *never* died. Was he a better person than all the others listed in Hebrews 11? No, his faith pleased the Lord – but so did the faith of all the others. Enoch was, no doubt, a picture of the blessing that awaits believers who are alive when Jesus comes to earth a second time. Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

And, when he comes, may we be found with faith, for, according to verse 6, "Without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Much of Hebrews can seem heavy and difficult to understand. But, not Hebrews 11:6. This is pretty

clear. But, you can become confused theologically if you take the rewards that are promised to men and women of faith to mean that everything in life will go just like you want it to if you just have faith. Remember from last week, the rewards that are promised in the NT are eternal in nature. The man who wrote Hebrews was pastoring those who would read or hear this sermon by telling them that even if they were killed for their faith, as some of them most certainly would be not long after hearing this sermon read – even in that case, Abel’s faith should encourage them, knowing that they would soon be with Jesus and their deaths would not be in vain. Even more so, look for Jesus’ return!

When you are convinced that the NT teaches that you will be healed or everything will be put to rights in this life if you just believe, you are in danger of the temptation to abandon your faith when life goes badly. Do you think that when you begin to follow Jesus that Satan will leave you alone, saying, “Too bad – I lost him so I better move on to someone else,”? No. You now belong to God, and God’s enemy hates you even more than ever and will do anything to destroy your faith. Fortunately, God is the one who strengthens our faith through his Word so that when all the world thinks we are crazy, we are given strength to stand and to find deliverance in Jesus. Noah had that kind of faith.

I wanted to end this message with verse 6, but the language in verse 7 makes it clear that this is all one unit. Verse 1 says that faith is the assurance of the reality of that which is unseen by us. Noah had that faith, willing to be thought a fool because he believed God for something that had never been seen. Not only was his family saved, but his faith spoke judgment to the world, just like Abel’s faith spoke judgment to Cain. By the way – I almost used Noah’s example for the child dedication this morning. It would be timely, I think.

If you live your life according to the Gospel, you are out of step with the world. If you believe that the Bible is God’s authoritative Word in which he has given you everything you need to know about him and that your only hope of relationship with him is in Jesus, you may be so out of step with the world that your family and friends have begun to turn on you. Hebrews 11 was written for you! Keep your faith, which I am confident you will do as you stand firm on the unseen foundation of God’s Word. “But, I can see the Word on the screen and in the Bible and on my phone.” Yes, but how do you know it is the very Word of God? You know it by faith, and your faith will be strengthened by spending time in the Word. Remember this as you read – God’s Word always accomplishes the purpose for which it was intended, whether that be grace for those who believe or judgment for those who trust in themselves. Furthermore, your faith gives testimony to God’s existence and his ways.

Paul said something quite similar to what the author of Hebrews said about the kind of faith that will stand in the face of persecution and suffering. We will close this morning by reading Philippians 1:27-30:

27 Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, 28 and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. 29 For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, 30 engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.